

WARRIOR LIBRARIAN: HOW OUR IMAGE IS CHANGING (A PERSONAL LOOK)

by Melissa Wooton



When I decided that a librarian's life was the life for me, I really didn't consider it to be a career where I would do battle daily. At the time, I was exhausted from being a Warrior Manager and ready for a slower pace. So it was serendipity when the flier from library school came in the mail. Like Harry Potter getting his first owl post, I wasn't sure how it knew to find me, but it did. And it sounded perfect: reading, helping people—grateful people—find things, and of course, quiet. Of course, the brochure didn't promise any of that, but my preconception was that I would be a peacekeeper, and leave the war behind. Having been a librarian for four short years now, I realize we *are* a group of warriors, although some of our battles are changing.

Becoming a librarian, for me, was all about timing. Right out of high school, I would not have considered the career. But after college and four years in the high pay, high stress, no fun world of corporate management, I was ready to listen. Even in spite of the big roadblock that had stopped me before: the Image. The image of the bun-wearing, finger-pointing shush-er who didn't want anyone touching "her" books, and who had no friends or interests or social life. In my defense, I was just part of the flock—as it turns out, that old stereotype is even getting her own action figure, complete with bun and sensible shoes, pointing the finger at all the *Chatty Cathys* of the world.

Debunking that myth is a daily battle of mine, answering patrons who question why I actually *wanted* to be a librarian, or that I actually needed a master's degree in order to be one. I've had in-depth conversations with more than one patron who wanted to be absolutely clear that this was my chosen career, that I had been serious enough about this goal to actually pursue higher education, and that I realized all of the connotations in terms of compensation and social status. But after assuring one man that it was shockingly true, he was kind enough to validate my choice with a pitying look, and a unenthusiastic "That's great. Good for you." I guess that battle is never-ending.

So, I aspired to be a librarian, ala Parker Posey in the movie *Party Girl*—an interesting, fun-loving snappy dresser who just happened to find fulfillment cataloguing and shelving books. Again, naïve. The bigger fight in public libraries is not keeping things ordered and peaceful. It is in actually attracting people to work in them. Even in *library school*, the shift is toward *Information Science*, not just *Library Science*. To be fair, there is usually much more money to be made in web design than in story time. And you don't have to also do maintenance and security to boot, unless you're working for a new start-up.

In my case, I had my mid-life crisis in my twenties, and knew that public service was where I wanted to be. However, it is just as challenging as my previous career. In the past, public libraries may have been more about books and quiet, but now they are all about community needs and marketing. Bringing in the programs that the people want (and trying to tie books to them) and selling then to compete with the thousand other options available to our patrons is job number one. Fortunately, this is a battle I can care about and believe in.

My own awareness of the fight on the national front has changed also. Growing up, I don't remember too many hot news stories featuring librarians, but probably because I wasn't looking for them. Librarians and library organizations are still fighting the same fights for money and personal freedoms and against censorship. Now, I try to pay more attention, and it's amazing what I find out: I am part of a profession that "constitute(s) one of the nation's main centers of thoughtless and unreconstructed leftism." That kind of blows the bun right out of the hair. I don't feel that I'm a controversial person, but it's good for the image. Maybe the action figure should carry a stylus, pulling up the (Library) Bill of Rights on her palm pilot. And the conservative dress could be replaced by a knee-length skirt and a pair of kicky boots, while we're at it. Yes, it's hypocritical keeping the doll a "her," but maybe the old stereotype isn't *all* bad.

I'll even admit, some days I resemble that old image. I do often wonder where all the parents have gone while their children are in the library for hours unattended? And why anyone thinks it's acceptable to hold a conversation on their cell phone while surfing the net? And, if anyone actually comes in the library to read anymore? I've "shushed" a patron before, but I'm learning to let it go. Sometimes the greener fields of corporate librarianship look good. I wouldn't mind the normal hours and the extra money. But at the end of the day, the public library is still the place for me. As we change from guardians of quiet study to information specialists in library community centers, our battles are even more important and well worth waging.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Lowry, Rich. "The Ideological Librarians ", www.townhall.com/columnists/richlowry/rl20030922.shtml



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